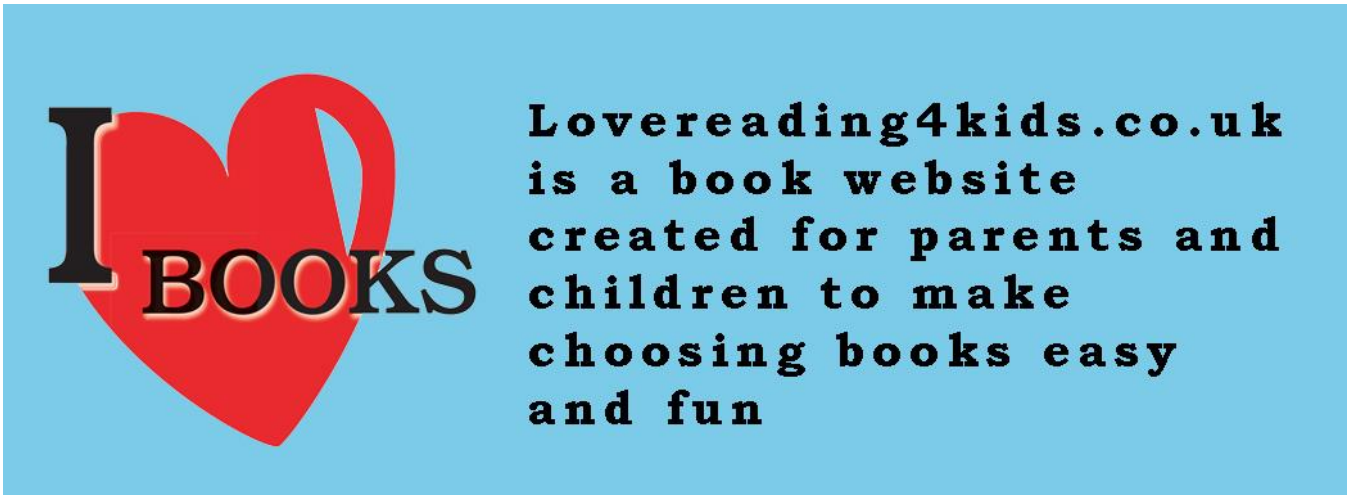


Opening extract from

Accidental Superstar

Written by

Marianne Levy

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ACCIDENTAL
SUPER
STAR
VOX
VINYL
TOP
MUSIC
NOT JUST
ME
MAD
LOVE

MARIANNE LEVY

ACCIDENTAL SUPER STAR



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For Willow



The picture quality's not the best. But even so, it's clear I'm having a good time. I'm smiling so much you can see all my teeth and I'm shutting my eyes on the high notes and everything. And my voice sounds all right, I think. Not perfect, but not terrible, either.

It's a shame you can also see a pack of extra-strong blackhead-removal cream on my desk. And heaps of clothes on my bedroom floor. And something round and fluffy sticking out from under the bed that I think was once a pepperoni pizza.

If I'd known that two million people were going to be watching, I'd probably have done a bit of tidying up.

CHAPTER ONE



'Amanda, will you please turn it down? Some of us are trying to work.'

Basically, my sister had got her first pay cheque and bought a new stereo which she had on pretty much 24/7. Even at night. Especially at night.

Meanwhile Lacey had cut her own fringe and because it didn't look completely terrible was putting serious pressure on me to join her. Honestly. You get whole entire lessons on how to deal with people offering you cigarettes and drugs but no one prepares you for your best friend clicking a pair of scissors in your face and saying, 'It'll really show off your eyes.'

Oh, and Mum and Dad's divorce had come through. So there was that.

Otherwise it was a normal sort of a Saturday morning and I was lying on my bed supposedly doing my English but in fact doodling lyrics, because that's how I like to warm up for homework. Of course, sometimes I spend so long on the warm-up I run out of time before I reach the main event.

The problem is that writing songs is just so much

more interesting than homework. Writing songs is more interesting than anything. Except listening to songs that other people have written, which is the *other* way I warm up for homework.

It is possible that I don't spend as much time on my homework as I should.

But this song wouldn't leave me alone. The hook had been following me around all morning, something about 'break-up, make-up', with a little pause, then a defiant flick-flick, like the notes were turning around and walking away.

For a second, I had it, there, whole in my head.

♫ *Gonna break out my make-up*
For this stupid break-up

And then the pause, and then . . .

Thump thump, thump-thump thump.

'Amanda, will you turn it down, just for a second? I am in the middle of academic study.'

For just a second, the bass boom did stop. Then it started again.

I was beginning to realize that I'd been wasting my life. All those years of Amanda not having a new stereo. Glorious, peaceful years, when I could doze off on my bed or have a conversation with Lacey or think of a tune . . .

The noise intensified.

'MANDA! My walls are VIBRATING.'

'You said just for a second!'

I grabbed my lyric book and wrote everything down before it got away from me again, then pulled my guitar across the bed to get the tune into my fingers.

At which point the door opened.

'Katie, I thought you were doing homework?'

My big sister stood in the doorway and gave me one of her looks.

Amanda is tall, with a long face and a long nose and long fingers. But even though all the sticky-outy bits of her are thin, the middle bits are pretty solid. By which I mean, she's got broad shoulders and biggish boobs, and they make her look fatter than she is. I'm allowed to say that because I have them too. (Thanks, Mum.) Then there's the Cox hair, which is mad, half curly, half straight, and the Cox skin, which is pale with an oily T-zone.

'I am about to start a very important essay on *Julius Caesar*, actually.'

Up went her eyebrows. 'And you're writing it on the guitar?'

'If only.'

Which Mands took as a signal to sit down on my bed, giving Shakespeare a close-up view of her bum. Which seemed as good a moment as any to call it a day.

It's like I always say with homework: you can push it too far. It's really important to know when to stop.

'I liked what you were playing just now,' said Amanda.

I played it again.

'Does it have words?'

I had a go at singing it. Only, it didn't come out fun and defiant like I'd intended it to. It just came out a bit sad.

'Do you think,' said Amanda, 'that maybe you've written enough songs about the divorce?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's over and we're OK. So stop dwelling.'

For the record, there hadn't been *that* many. Which I told her.

'*Four-Fingered Twix* wasn't about the divorce! And *Home Sweet Home* wasn't either. Well, maybe a tiny bit.'

'*Goodbye bedroom*,' sang Amanda, '*Goodbye past. Homes like ours aren't made to last*. I'd say that was about the divorce. Wouldn't you?'

She had a point. But saying goodbye to the literal home of my entire childhood, how could I *not* write about it? All the good memories, like the guinea-pig babies and Easter egg hunting and next-door's cat falling in the paddling pool, were in that house, and when Dad left we had to sell it. He used his half of the proceeds to rent a place in California where you can sometimes see dolphins from the kitchen window. We used our half to rent a flat in Harltree, a

nowheresville just outside London, where what you can see from the kitchen window are foxes going through the bins.

In the end, divorce affects everything. Even the wildlife.

'You're bringing us down,' said my sister.

'Oh, blame it all on me. The big bad apple on the family tree.'

She laughed. 'You should put that in a song. Anyway, things change, people move on.'

'Dad certainly seems to have.'

'THIS IS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.'

'I'm supposed to be miserable! I'm a teenager. That's just me!'

'Doesn't sound like the Katie I know,' said Amanda, which was kind of her, given that it did sound like the Katie I knew, for the last few months, at least.

'You know what? You're right,' I said. 'From now on I will be *upbeat*.' I waved at the window, and any potential bin foxes, and plucked out a bit of a tune.

'*So* much better,' said Amanda. 'And anyway, it's not all doom and gloom. Mum's got a boyfriend.'

My fingers froze. 'What? No she hasn't.'

'She has.'

'Amanda, Mum isn't seeing anyone. She knows it's way too soon for that. I've told her.'

'Which is why she hasn't told you.'

'And she told *you*?'

Mands looked away. 'Not specifically. But there are signs.'

The thing about Amanda is that she's read too many fairy stories about happy ever after and handsome princes and things. What she doesn't realize is that we had the perfect family. We were the perfect family. And then we weren't. And we never would be ever again.

No biggie.

'What signs?' I said.

'OK . . .' She ticked them off on her fingers. 'She's been singing in the shower.'

'Practising for karaoke.'

'She bought a new jacket.'

'It's been cold!'

'She's got –' Amanda paused for effect – 'the glow.'

'She went on a sunbed!'

'And why do you think that is?' said Amanda.

'I told you,' I said. 'It's been really cold. Can you please get your behind off my books?'

'OK, but listen –'

'No,' I said. '*You* listen. Mum was really messed up by all the Dad stuff. It took her ages to get even slightly sorted and she's only just got herself into anything like an OK place. I hardly think she'd go and mess that up with someone new right now.'

Amanda stood up. 'Not with you telling her she can't – *Urgh!* What's that?'

I had a look. 'Pizza.'

'Katie, we had pizza three nights ago. You are revolting.'

'Then you are free to amuse yourself elsewhere.'

So she got up, and left.

After that I did *try* to do my homework. I tried to write a new song too, because that tune I'd come up with was properly catchy. I played it over and over and over again, only, instead of lyrics, all I could think about was Mum.

It was slightly disturbing to hear that I'd been holding her back, because all I care about is her happiness. And mine, I suppose, but mine is kind of dependent on hers, so it's all the same, really.

Which is why I resolved to talk to her about it at the earliest opportunity.

That wouldn't be for ages, though, as Mum was taking loads of extra shifts at the hospital. Still, if I had to wait a day or two, or even a fortnight, for the chance to have what would probably be quite an awkward conversation, then that was just how it would have to be. Shame.

Which is when I heard her key in the door.

'Katie? Are you home? I feel like I haven't talked to you properly in ages!'

Sometimes I think that maybe the universe is using me to have a bit of a laugh.

'I'm in my room,' I said.

'Coming!'

There was no way she was glowing, although it was true that Mum did look a bit happier than she had been. Probably just the effect of her new jacket. And the haircut. And, was that an actual manicure . . . ?

'So,' I said. 'How're things? It's all been quite tough lately, hasn't it?'

'I suppose so,' said Mum.

'What with the move,' I said. 'And this place being so cramped.'

'It's growing on me,' said Mum.

'Like fungus,' I said.

I suppose I should describe our flat, but there's not much point. It had somebody else's curtains on the windows and someone else's hairy old carpet on the floor. So it wasn't really ours at all.

Mum was still going. 'I know things have been . . . well. But I feel like we're really turning a corner.'

' "We" as in . . .'

'Me, you, Amanda. Us.'

Which made me feel a little better. 'Maybe.'

'Definitely,' said Mum. 'It's like there's been a dark cloud over us, but you know what, summer's on its way, we're settled here now . . . we've made it, Katie.'

'Are you sure?' I said.

'I really do think we're going to be all right,' said

Mum. 'So cheer up. Promise?'

I wasn't going to promise, but I did say, 'I'll try,' which was pretty much the same thing. Because maybe we would be all right, now. Mands was pretty annoying and I wasn't at all sure about Mum's taste in jackets but, all things considered – and there were a lot of things to consider – we'd made it through quite well.

'Are you all right to do dinner without me tonight?'

'Of course,' I said, doing a little dance inside. The things Mum does to food would be considered torture if it wasn't already dead. 'What's the occasion?'

'It's karaoke at the Dog and Duck, and for once I'm not at work.'

Mum is a complete karaoke fiend. I think her version of *My Way* is better than the original. And the Elvis version. It's maybe up there with Nina Simone's.

'Is that why you're in such a good mood?' I said.

She flushed. 'They're a nice bunch in there. They don't ask about your father. And they like my singing.'

Of course they liked Mum's singing. How could they not?

'So *that's* why you're so happy,' I said. 'It's funny, because Amanda thought you had a new boyfriend!'

There was this pause.

And then Mum said, 'Clever Amanda.'

'What? Why? Amanda isn't clever. Amanda doesn't

know anything. You don't have a boyfriend.'

'He's called Adrian,' said Mum. 'I'm sure you'll like him a lot.'

I wanted to say: *Adrian? How long has this been going on for? And did you not think to maybe ask me first?*

'Adrian?' I said. 'How long has this been going on for? And, excuse me, but did you not think to maybe ask me first?'

'Only a couple of months,' said Mum. 'And I don't need your permission, Katie.'

'But I thought . . .' and then I ran out of words and just stared at her.

'He saw me singing a few times and said I had a nice voice, and then one thing led to another and . . .' I had to tune out for a bit. I came back in on, 'I'd never have started seeing him if I hadn't thought you could deal with it. He's lovely, Katie. I promise.'

'If he ever hurts you, I'll kill him with my bare hands. And my straighteners, which are pretty lethal when they're heated up.'

She laughed, which was annoying, because I meant it.

'I'll have him over for lunch on Sunday. I'm sure you'll get on like a house on fire.'

At which point she went back downstairs. And I *did* feel like a house on fire.

Which I don't think was what Mum meant at all.